
Pedagogical dialogues with 2 year olds in “preschool” settings

What do they look like?

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This article reports on a project midway through a 2-year investigation of the pedagogical interactions that take place for 2 year olds in mixed-age early childhood education (ECE) settings. Teachers slowed down and scrutinised their practice by videoing, analysing, and theorising their dialogue with and about 2 year olds as a central form of teaching and learning. The primary aim of the project was to make explicit the nature of 2 year olds’ dialogue in ECE settings traditionally oriented to 3 to 4 year olds. Fine-tuned coding of dialogue and their interpreted meanings by the teachers highlight the impact of different events in the ECE setting on the nature of dialogue that takes place and identified 12 different genre in which 2 year olds were found to engage (or disengage). The insights generated from this project support teachers to re-vision their pedagogy in ways that are inclusive of the specialised genre of this younger age group, and celebrate the many pedagogical provocations for dialogue in preschool settings.

Two year olds in “preschool”

Due to a combination of falling preschool rolls and increased parental demand for 2 year olds to attend ECE in tandem with the changing structure of delivery to reflect funding priorities, ECE settings are increasingly enrolling 2 year olds into their programmes (Education Counts, 2017). At the same time, teachers state that they are often poorly equipped to respond to the specific developmental and social needs of this age group due to a lack of preservice training in this area and limited access to professional development (White, Ranger, & Peter, 2016). The situation is magnified within “preschool” contexts that are traditionally oriented to a) older peers and b) single-age provision. In a recent report, the Education Review Office (ERO) (2016) explains that almost half of the 235 ECE services reviewed in 2014 did not provide quality ECE for this age group, nor could those teachers articulate what a responsive curriculum might “look like”. These recent findings align with previous New Zealand research by Duncan et al. (2006) where teachers working with 2 year

olds in kindergartens identified significant challenges and frustrations concerning their inclusion in ECE settings traditionally oriented to 3 and 4 year olds.

Two year olds’ dialogue as pedagogy

Central to a responsive curriculum is the capacity for teachers to engage in meaningful dialogue with learners. While much is now believed to be known about the importance of this dialogue for 3- and 4-year-old learners in ECE as a form of pedagogic progression (Siraj-Blatchford, 2007), very little is articulated about 2 year olds specifically. Yet understanding 2 year olds’ dialogue with teachers and peers is especially important because of the potential for a greater awareness to lead to better learning as teachers respond to the priorities of this age group (Birigen et al., 2012; Elfer, 2014). Ødegaard (2006) highlights the importance of paying attention to the way dialogue constructs the kind of shared meaning that is necessary in order for teachers of 2 year olds to access the learning potential in situations, particularly those where conventions are challenged, emotions are high, and

serious life issues are raised as a consequence. These types of meaning-making situations lie at the centre of 2 year olds' learning because they set the scene for intersubjective learning encounters.

Notwithstanding limiting developmental strongholds that have the potential to cast 2 year olds as pre-verbal and therefore outside of dialogue, it is clear that 2 year olds do communicate in different ways from their older peers. There is ample evidence to suggest that 2 year olds learn through movement in space—engaging with people, places, and things in a fleeting, yet connecting, manner—rather than attending to traditional forms of “activities” or 1–1 dyadic verbal conversations (Lokken, 2000; Rutanen, 2014). As Hayashi and Tobin (2011) highlight, learning is an embodied experience for these younger members of the early years environment, calling for teachers to keenly observe their physical cues as important provocations for learning. Hayashi and Tobin point out the role of older peers in this regard, suggesting that there are benefits for both age groups when opportunities are opened up for older children to support their younger peers through practical tasks and experiences. The importance of noticing 2 year olds' language in all its subtle (often nonverbal) forms, and paying attention to the strategic orientation of the dialogue themselves as a source of insight cannot be understated here:

These intersubjective processes depend crucially on young children's basic understanding of persons as intentional agents whose attention may be followed, manipulated or shared ... [At this age] they share attention with adults to outside entities, as evidenced in the emergence of such things as social referencing, gaze following, imitative learning of actions on objects, and prelinguistic gestural communication ... (Akhtar & Tomasello, 1998, p. 328)

Our approach

Dialogic methodology (Bakhtin, 1986) offers a route to both the language forms that are deployed within dialogue *and* their strategic orientations. It is based on the study of subjectivities in action which “assumes social communication to precede individual (verbal) thought” (Linell, 1998, p. 266). As such, emphasis is placed on the potential of dialogue “to shape selves and look at how selves can respond, in different ways, to this

shaping” (Sullivan, 2013, p. 43). The purpose of dialogic methodology is to interrogate the nuances of dialogue and their meanings for the people involved. This involves qualitative analysis of spoken and unspoken dialogue in everyday contexts; and, then, interpretations of their significance. It also invites quantitative insights of fine-tuned coding of dialogue and their significance in the social space by those directly and indirectly involved to gain the fullest appreciation of its meaning (Linell, 1998). As Hamston (2006) suggests, this approach “helps us to appreciate the power of language to shape and re-shape our lived cultural experience” (p. 71).

Employing dialogic methodology as a route to engaging with 2 year olds' dialogue and their significance for learning, this research set out to understand what these actually “looked like” and, importantly, how they could be interpreted by preschool teachers through this dialogic lens. Based on a set of dialogic principles concerning the nature of language in-between subjects, and its form-shaping potential, emphasis was given to the meanings that are generated out of what can be seen (as opposed to what might be assumed based on defining theories or prior knowledge), and the pedagogical significance of these dialogue. We set out to generate a “chorus” of interpretations concerning what could be seen and, importantly, what could not, when a variety of everyday social events (often previously outside the “curriculum gaze” of teachers) were granted centrality. We were interested to know the nature of these dialogue, what features of dialogue were used, and by whom, as well as what kinds of learning experiences were produced as a consequence. Engaging in in-depth reflections about the dialogic significance of these dialogue for 2-year-old learners in the “preschool” settings, teachers were then able to consider the implications of these insights for their pedagogy.

Dialogue genres

In order to understand the different types of dialogue that took place in preschool settings for 2 year olds, we operationalised the dialogic concept of “genre”. In dialogic methodology, genres are described as clusters of language events that are characterised by certain ways of communicating, thus producing different combinations of dialogue for strategic purposes (Rockwell, 2008). Our emphasis was on genre where intersubjective and/or alteric meaning-making was evident within the dialogic event.

Alterity “is based on the dynamics between the self and the other” which allows for “heterogeneity of different perspectives and different voices” (Junefelt, 2011, p. 160); while intersubjectivity is evident when there is a shared focus and understanding. Karin Junefelt suggests they are two sides of the same coin since alterity may lead to subsequent understanding and negotiation if recognised within the dialogic event. We could find no research precedents that have applied this notion to the dialogue of 2 year olds. Through this conceptual lens we were able to identify the genres that were “produced, recognised and named” (Linell, 1998, p. 238) by teachers in dialogue with 2 year olds, as a result of these codifications of language and its ascribed meanings. Identifying genre, the teachers, with researchers, were able to create and construct “a certain ensemble of social relations in the world” (Bandlamudi, 1999, p. 43) and, in doing so, have the opportunity to access increased understandings of 2 year olds' dialogue that made up their “preschool” experience.

What we did

Video was chosen as a central means of visual access to the dialogue which could then be shared between teachers and researchers as a rich source of discussion about what could be seen and what insights were thus offered to pedagogical practice as a consequence. Bandlamudi (1999) describes the use of video in dialogic research as offering “parts of culture in contention” (p. 47). Our use of multiple cameras from multiple standpoints added to this complexity (White, 2016). It also brought with it many ethical issues which were carefully addressed via the University of Waikato ethics application process. This meant that consent processes stated categorically that no anonymity or confidentiality could be assured for participants, who signed up for the research on that basis. We gained written consent from families for their 2 year old to be video recorded, working with all families and children to ensure that they could withdraw at any time up until data analysis. Given the age of children involved, we were also vigilant concerning 2 year olds having the opportunity to withdraw their assent from being videoed on the day even though their parents had consented. This was gauged on each day of filming by the researchers in consultation with teachers and parents based on observations of

2 year olds who demonstrated discomfort with the video-recording devices.

During 2017, the research team generated and analysed video of four 2-year-olds' dialogue in their preschool settings (one kindergarten and one education and care service in Tauranga) with over 50 peers and 10 teachers over 4 days (2 days per setting) in order to better understand the pedagogical potential of their dialogue. In both ECE contexts there was only a small number of 2 year olds enrolled so these numbers reflect their reality on the days of video recording.

Dialogue were sourced from three visual fields:

1. Teachers wore video-recorder glasses that capture their pedagogical interactions with 2 year olds and peers.
2. Two year olds were filmed via a swivel tracking camera that followed their movements and encounters through a tracking device worn in a vest by the 2 year olds themselves.
3. A 360-degree video camera captured a view of the wider setting in order to give access to the broader interactive context for 2 year olds' dialogue in space.

Each camera offered a different visual perspective on the same events and was used to collectively hone in on the individual 2 year olds as they moved about the setting, while

simultaneously offering a wider view of the social and pedagogical context. A total of 7 hours of split-screen, synchronised footage was generated, out of which teachers and researchers selected 2 hours for analysis. Their selections were based on the pedagogical significance they gave to their chosen excerpts as potential dialogic events. Teachers were given a definition of dialogic event (see Box 1).

A *dialogic event* is an utterance that seeks, and often (but not always immediately), receives a response, has form-shaping potential (i.e., can alter meaning and/or contribute to shared meaning for some or all involved), and is made up of a series of strategically oriented language interactions that, together, comprise a specific genre.

BOX 1. DIALOGIC EVENT DEFINED

A total of 31 selections were made by teachers and researchers—ranging from 1 minute to 14 minutes' duration. Selected footage was then entered into a software program called v-note¹ which allowed teachers to code offsite (and at times that suited them). Over a 6-month period, teachers across each teaching team independently coded and reflected on the significance of different types of selected dialogue. Codes were generated out of these observations and reflections and included:

1. the verbal and nonverbal language used by 2 year olds
2. the type of language used by teachers and peers as orienting strategies (e.g., demonstrating, questioning, narrating, modeling, etc.)
3. the perceived meaning-making of 1 + 2 combinations for 2 year olds' intersubjective meaning-making (i.e., did they lead to shared meaning as intersubjective events? Or did they pull away from shared meaning, as alteric events?).

GENRE = Two-year-old language + adult/peer orienting strategies + perceived meaning-making

Figure 1 shows a sample of what this coding looked like in v-note.

Genre clusters, based on identified combinations of language and their perceived relevance, were then discoverable by the teachers and researchers alike. We present these in the section that follows.

Findings

Based on the teachers' coding and discussions, the research team was able to identify the nature of dialogue that took place for these 2 year olds. Some interesting features arose from our analysis which highlights the subtle language of 2 year olds in the preschool setting. The

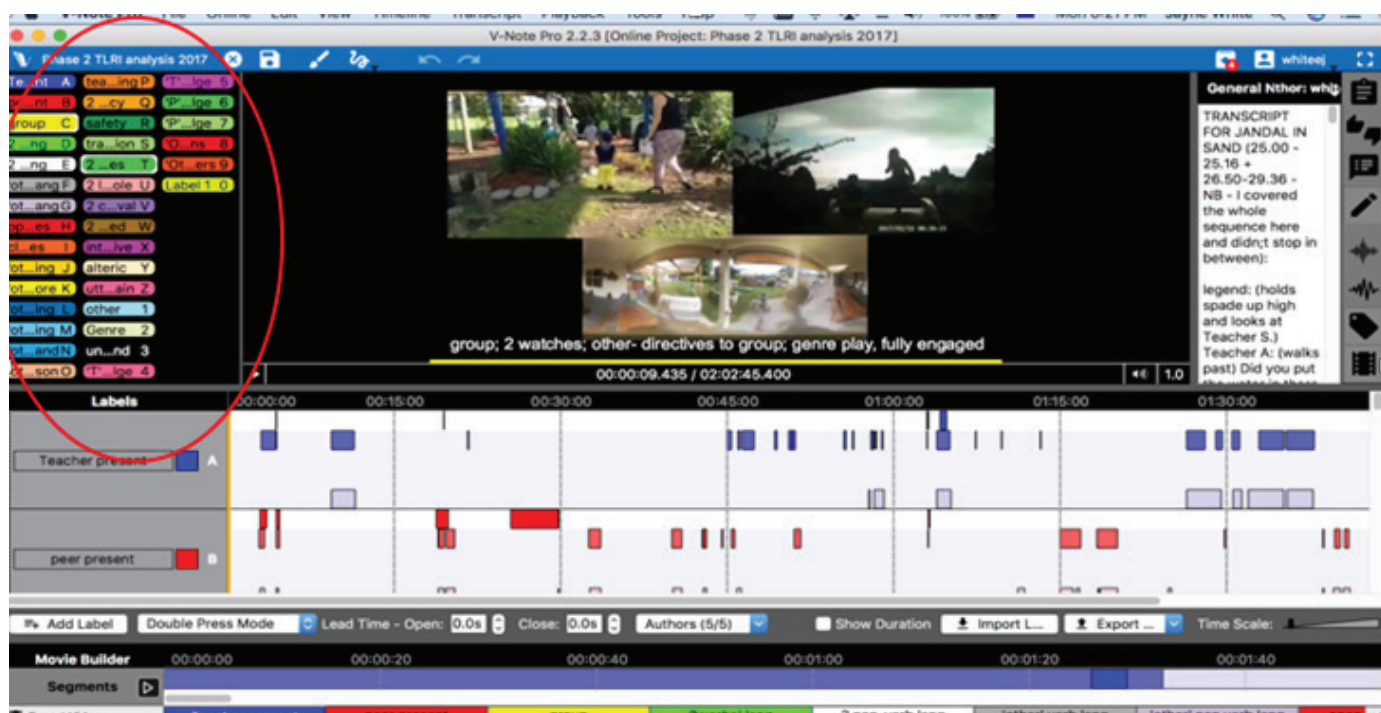


FIGURE 1. SCREEN SHOT OF ANALYSIS IN V-NOTE

following graph presents the overall percentage of the types of language used by the 2 year olds.

Overwhelmingly, a feature of language across all selected events was the amount of nonverbal language used by the 2 year olds. Nonverbal or verbal/nonverbal combinations of language, as opposed to their use of verbal language alone, were also more common than verbal only. Often, nonverbal language was used alongside watching and comprised bodily gestures or movements with some communicative purpose. Two year olds also spent considerable time watching—often as a prerequisite for joining in a particular genre as part of a wider group of teachers and peers (which was most often the case as opposed to one-on-one dialogue with teachers or peers).

Upon closer inspection of the orienting dialogue strategies used by teachers and peers within these events (that is, demonstrate, ignore or reprimand, narrate, question, instruct/

suggest/offer, or more than one of these), a series of dialogue patterns became evident. Interestingly, teacher questioning (questioning was not used by peers) did not produce verbal responses by 2 year olds during these filmed events—often leading to alteric nonverbal responses or disengagement from the event; while the use of multiple strategies appeared to elicit increased 2 year olds’ nonverbal combinations of language (i.e., nonverbal–verbal or nonverbal–watch). An example of this was evident in the sandpit when a 2 year old was jumping in a small pool of water that had collected in the sandpit, close to his older peer who was attempting to construct a channel in the sand. The splashing of the 2 year old altered what his older peer was engaged in doing and simultaneously involved the teacher who intervened using narrating, demonstrating, suggesting, and instructing strategies to support both learners to achieve their goals. Throughout

this event the 2 year old employed nonverbal–watch and nonverbal–verbal combinations of language that were responded to by his peer verbally. Produced out of this sand genre were events of alterity, intersubjectivity, and then agency as the 2 year old invited another older peer to “jump” from his position on a rock, as the 2 year old demonstrated how to do this by jumping repeatedly into the pool of water in the sandpit.

Clustering these combinations of 2 year olds’ language and adult–peer strategies, we have been able to identify 12 different genres that took place in these selected events.

As the above graph shows, each genre was oriented differently by teachers or peers, signalling the wide variety of strategies and language combinations that were employed in 2 year olds’ dialogue during a typical day in the preschool setting. As the third component of our analysis we wanted to understand the extent to which these different genre produced intersubjectivity and/or alterity (as identified by the teachers). The table below summarises these for five of the genres presented in Figure 2, and highlights the different combinations that took place.

Taken together, these genre combinations highlight the strategies and rules of encounter for dialogue involving 2 year olds in these preschool settings. They ranged from complex language interplays between peers, teachers, and 2 year olds as groups to exclusive dialogue between 2 year olds and their peers in the absence of teachers. In cases where 2 year olds appeared to be on the periphery of an event, they appeared to be intersubjectively engaged nonetheless. Watching was especially pronounced when the genre required very specific rituals, skills, or rules of encounter, such as outdoor play where games were taking place, or at mat-time where certain rituals were required in order for the 2 year old to participate.

Higher degrees of 2 year olds’ verbal and nonverbal language combinations were found in dialogue events where there were closed resources (that is, any resource that has a specific end-point; for example, brush painting). This was surprising to us given the emphasis *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) places on “open-ended and durable resources” (p. 48) in desirable practice examples for infants and toddlers. These types of resources were utilised primarily in groups made up of peers

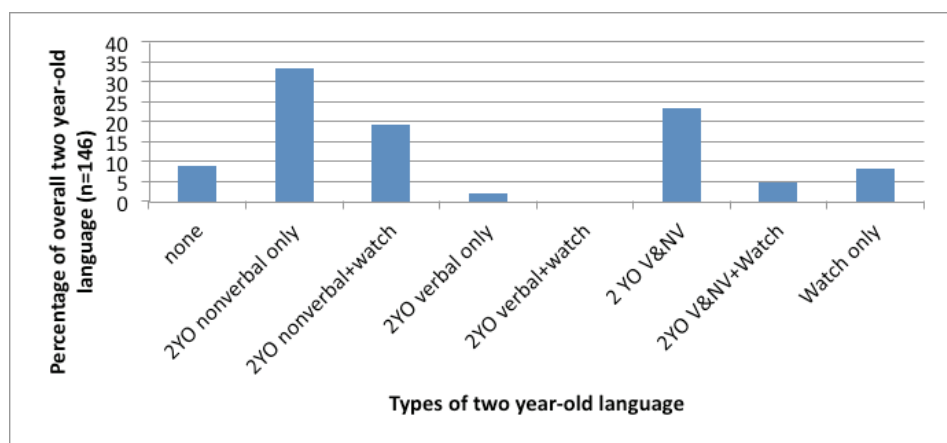


FIGURE 2. TYPES OF LANGUAGE USED BY 2 YEAR OLDS OVER SELECTED DIALOGIC EVENTS

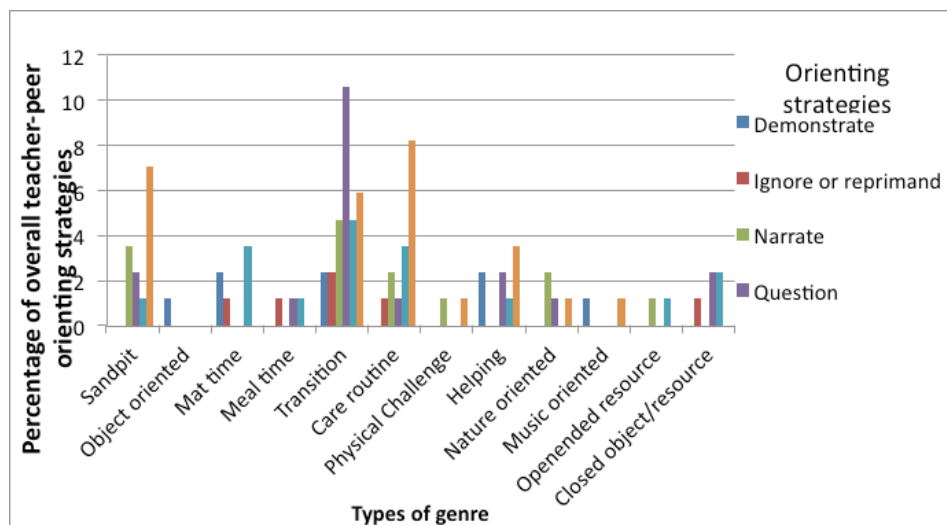


FIGURE 3 PERCENTAGE OF TEACHER–PEER ORIENTING STRATEGIES USED WITHIN EACH GENRE WITH 2 YEAR OLDS

TABLE 1. LANGUAGE COMBINATIONS BY GENRE

Genre	Language used by 2 year old NV = nonverbal. V = verbal (n = 133)		Orienting strategies by teacher or peer (n = 85)		Degree of intersubjectivity and/or alterity identified by teachers with the genre I+A = combination of intersubjectivity and alterity. (n = 105)	
Sandpit: Events in the outdoor space of a sandpit	NV	1%	Narrate	3.5%	Intersubjectivity Alterity	9.5% 5%
	V&NV	3%	Question	2.5%		
	NV+watch	5%	Instruct, suggest, or offer	1%		
	V&NV+watch	1.5%	Multiple strategies	7%		
	Watch alone	2%				
Care routine: Events that included toileting, washing hands, nappy changing	NV	5%	Ignore or reprimand	1%	Intersubjectivity Alterity	10.5% 4%
	NV+watch	1%	Narrate	2.5%		
	V&NV	7%	Question	1%		
			Instruct, suggest, or offer	3.5%		
			Multiple strategies	8.5%		
Mat-time: Events where there is a large group in one "mat" space—in this case 2–3 times a day for each ECE service	NV	5%	Demonstrate	2.5%	Intersubjectivity Alterity	5% 2%
	NV+watch	2%	Ignore or reprimand	1%		
	V&NV	2%	Instruct, suggest, or offer	3.5%		
Meal time: Events that involve eating either in a group or alone, typically at the table	NV	2%	Ignore or reprimand	1%	Intersubjectivity Alterity I+A	4% 2% 3%
	NV+watch	4.5%	Question	1%		
	V&NV+watch	1%	Instruct, suggest, or offer	1%		
Transition: Events where the 2 year old was moving between any of the above	NV	13%	Demonstrate	2.5%	Intersubjectivity Alterity I+A	19% 8% 1%
	V	1.5%	Ignore or reprimand	2.5%		
	V&NV	9%	Narrate	5%		
	Watch only	1.5%	Question	11%		
	NV+watch	4.5%	Instruct, suggest, or offer	5%		
			Multiple strategies	6%		

and teacher/s who used orienting strategies such as instruction, suggestion, or offers, as well as the employment of multiple strategies either by peers or teachers.² In these events, intersubjectivity was identified as present (either between peers and 2 year olds alone or in the presence of teachers also). Increased levels of intersubjectivity were often identified alongside orienting strategies used by the teachers such as narrating or demonstrating—the latter used also by peers during intersubjective events such as in the sandpit or during routines where they played a teina role. Greater degrees of alterity were discoverable in dialogue events where there were set routines or in the presence of peers alone. The most pronounced of these occurred during mealtimes where 2 year olds collaborated with peers to share food or engage in humour that was in resistance to teacher priorities concerning the dialogue that took place. These were largely silent dialogue characterised by nonverbal language, in groups and outside of the presence of the teacher.

The findings clearly show that some genres are more likely to produce alterity and/or intersubjectivity than others, and that these are not always within the purview of teachers. Since both are linked to the negotiation of learning, and appear to be a powerful source of agency for 2 year olds in these preschool settings, these

different dialogue clusters are worthy of teachers' attention. What we can say at this stage of the investigation is that peers play a vital role in 2 year olds' dialogue and that their orienting strategies are important for 2 year olds' intersubjectivity and alterity, as well as for teachers. However, it is the teachers who offer the strongest language model and when verbal plus nonverbal language plus watching are used by 2 year olds, these are most effective when matched by others. Moreover, it seems that dialogue events are richer when they take place in and between (in the case of transition) flexible learning environments as opposed to more structured activities that take place in these "preschool" settings.

Implications for practice

Our results so far highlight the highly sophisticated ways in which 2 year olds engage in dialogue with adults, peers, and the wider "preschool" environment as intersubjective and/or alteric events. These dialogic events do not happen by chance, but are strategic orientations that take place in negotiation with teachers and peers as well as the environment that the teachers in this study have come to describe as "a dialogue dance". Our insights are important because they highlight both the alteric nature of 2 year olds' engagement in the preschool setting which has often been seen as disruptive,

the genres that are more likely to lead to shared meaning (intersubjectivity), and the important combinations of the two. We wish to point out that we are not suggesting that these genre are generalisable to other 2 year olds or other preschool settings, but that they "come laden with specific ingredients and meanings ... each utterance echoes, cites, distorts, elaborates, or questions previous and parallel representations of knowledge" (Rockwell, 2008, p. 274). These discoveries highlight Junefelt's (2011) point that intersubjectivity and alterity are "two sides of the same coin" arising from effective dialogue for 2 year olds and negotiations of meaning that may become a source of learning for all.

For teachers to engage pedagogically with these and other dialogic events, a great deal of attunement and sensitivity to the 2 year olds' needs concerning their orienting language and its impact on learning is clearly required. The peer group also play a vital role. Our investigation so far suggests that there is much more to be seen than at first meets the eye, and that codification has an important role to play in illuminating these subtle dialogues. Armed with these understandings, teachers can develop sound pedagogical principles for high-quality engagement with 2 year olds in mixed-age settings—considering what "works" for effective learning to occur. Over the months ahead

these teachers will revise their programmes, policies, pedagogies, and practices to offer more opportunities for inclusive dialogue. They will revise their expectations of 2 year olds as “preschoolers” and pay increased attention to their nonverbal cues, including watching, and the reciprocal nature of their participation with people, places, and things as a source of learning for all. This is clearly an important agenda for everyone in mixed-age ECE settings that are committed to age-responsive pedagogies for all.

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Notes

- 1 Retrieved from <https://v-note.org/research>
- 2 A weakness in our coding to date was that we didn't code orienting strategies used by teachers and peers separately

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This article was developed in collaboration with ECE teachers and researchers as part of a TLRI team located in Tauranga NZ. Teachers **Shavaurn** and **Catherine** and senior teacher **Annette** are from Inspired Kindergarten Association; while **Caroline** and **Bev** teach at Gate Pa Preschool. All have taught for a number of years and share a lingering interest in 2 year olds. **Bridgette**, as emerging researcher in the project, shares an interest in teacher self-study—also the topic of her PhD at University of Waikato. Lead researcher **Jayne White** was located at University of Waikato for the earlier phases of the project and is now Professor ECE at RMIT, Melbourne, where she continues to explore dialogic pedagogy and associated concepts concerning the work of the eye.

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